

# France's Little Bit Of Africa—Djibouti

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DJIBOUTI, French Somalia—It is almost as if there had been no war in Indochina, no French defeat in Algeria, no breakdown in France's once far-flung colonial empire. It is as if the hands of the clock had stopped in the 1930s or even earlier.

In this sandy, sun-drenched corner of Africa, thousands of miles in time and space from the major world powerpoints, ramrod straight men of the French Foreign Legion still strut proudly. Shirts and khaki shorts always are immaculately pressed, haircuts are close and very military.

The Legion's colors once flew throughout the world—Guadaloupe to Saigon, Dakar to Madagascar. More than a quarter of the population of Africa alone lived under direct French rule. And always there was the Legion Etrangere—it was supreme, the symbol of the might of a great nation.

But time has marched on and Djibouti somehow has been left in the backwater, a curious museum piece, an historical anachronism, a diplomatic mystery. It is the only place in all Africa where the presence is legitimately and legally French.

"Yes," said the slightly greying French colonel, his voice in a near whisper. "Djibouti is a sort of throwback to the earlier, less complicated days. It is artificial in some ways, but for an old soldier it is not a bad spot to end a career."

The 45-year-old Legionnaire sat on the veranda of his pleasantly furnished home, reminiscing thoughtfully in French. A gentle sea breeze wafted through the trees. It was hot—very hot.

The officer pulled from a nearby shelf a dated issue of the respected daily *Le Monde*—June 1954. Dog-eared and faded, it carried a front page analysis of the French defeat at Dienbienphu. Moments later, he produced a recent issue with an analysis of the American and South Vietnamese incursion into Laos.

## "Too Complicated"

"You see," he said, "it is true the world has become much too complicated for us—the defeat in Indochina, the Algerian war, and the end of French empire for Africa before our colonies

## HOW DEEP IS THE WATER?

Richard Helms, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, speaking last week to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, outlined some urgent requirements for foreign intelligence. Among them: What is the scope of the strategic threat to U.S. security? What are current Soviet intentions?

Then, in a sudden turn to specifics, he furrowed more than one editorial brow with a reference to one of the lesser known problems in foreign intelligence.

"Or, for that matter," said he, "to give you an extreme example, how deep is the water alongside the docks in Djibouti? This question is not as far-fetched as it may sound. If France should one day grant independence to French Somaliland—now formally the Territory of the Afars and Issas—the area would almost certainly be a source of contention between Ethiopia, which looks to the United States for support, and Somalia, which is highly dependent on the Soviet Union. What ships could be used to land a UN peace-keeping force—or unload relief shipments? Thus information on Djibouti could suddenly become necessary to the United States government in an effort to prevent a new international crisis."

were really prepared—but out here in Djibouti, a man can still be a Frenchman because we know this place belongs to us."

The attitude of the colonel, who served in Indochina as a lieutenant—but was spared Dienbienphu by a leg wound—is characteristic of the older Europeans in this 8,000 square mile territory which on a map looks like a tiny notch hacked from the northernmost rim of the Horn of Africa. There are 150,000 people in French Somalia, about 95 percent of whom—if not more—are illiterate Islamic nomads who prowl the parched hill country with their undernourished herds as they have for centuries.

There are 10,000 Europeans, mostly French; half are military and their families. The balance are civil servants, who run the territory, and businessmen. The capital is Djibouti—proper, clean, well-designed, dignified and very colonial, a city of some 70,000 population surrounded on three sides by barbed wire.

The nomads can only enter the city if they have work permits and since the closure of the Suez Canal the city's economy has sputtered. Unemployment is said by officials to be mounting—presumably among the Africans who live in the city—but no figures were immediately available.

The French presence goes back to 1862, when France made an important Sultan on the

Somali coast. It was firmed up in the 1890s with agreements for trade between France and Ethiopia. It is said that somewhere in the archives of Paris or Addis Ababa there is a treaty giving Ethiopia residual rights to the area when the French leave.

But the French profess ignorance of such a document and, in any case, they are not ready to leave.

"You must understand the situation," a senior civil servant explained. "This place started as a coaling station—a kind of halfway point—to Indochina. Following the Second War we were thriving, but with the Middle East and the closing of the canal we have our problems. Our port is the biggest in the area, with a major railway linking Addis, but ship traffic has dwindled since the six-day war and business here is only 10 percent of what it was before the conflict of 1967.

"We know if France stays here, she is a force for peace. The moment we leave, the Ethiopians and Somalis will each assert their historic and ethnic claim to this land and there will be war. It is for that reason that we stay. For us the place means nothing. It costs France billions of francs each year."

The business community has indeed suffered with the closing of Suez, but is optimistic. "Some day we shall bloom again," a long-time merchant says. "A long time, but we will explain all. We are resting at